

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Jan. 5-7
Catahoula Lake: Jan , 21
NE LA: Jan. 20-21
NW LA: Jan. 9, Scaup: Jan 7

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Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	89,000	7,000	**	96,000
MOTTLED	19,000	23,000		42,000
GADWALL	490,000	713,000	**	1,203,000
WIGEON	6,000	38,000		44,000
GW TEAL	394,000	165,000		559,000
BW TEAL	15,000	5,000		20,000
SHOVELER	175,000	12,000	**	187,000
PINTAIL	30,000	78,000	**	108,000
TOTAL DABBLERS	1,218,000	1,041,000	**	2,259,000
SCAUP	74,000	245,000		319,000
RINGNECKED	307,000	226,000	2,000	535,000
CANVASBACK	2,000	182,000	88,000	272,000
TOTAL DIVERS	383,000	653,000	90,000	1,126,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,601,000	1,694,000	90,000	3,385,000
COOTS	549,000	1,386,000	**	1,935,000

**Estimate is less than 1,000

COMMENTS:

The 3.39 million ducks estimated from this survey is 6% higher than the December estimate of 3.20 million, 18% higher than last January's estimate of 2.87 million, and is 12% higher than the long-term average of 3.03 million. Estimates for all dabbling duck species declined from the December survey except American wigeon (19,000 to 44,000) and green-winged teal (509,000 to 559,000), but big increases in scaup (176,000 to 319,000) and canvasbacks (54,000 to 272,000) accounted for the increase

in total numbers of ducks. All dabbling ducks except gadwalls were below their long-term averages, although green-winged teal and shovelers were within 5%, and the 96,000 mallards was the second lowest January estimate on record. Conversely, scaup, ringed-necked ducks and canvasbacks were well above long-term averages, and the 272,000 is the highest canvasback estimate since this survey was initiated in 1969. After much cold weather in early November, December was unseasonably warm with few cold fronts. Heavy rainfall across much of the state in late-December and early-January is likely responsible for the apparent redistribution of some dabbling ducks from the coastal marshes.

Compared to the skewed distribution favoring southwest Louisiana in December, the relative abundance of ducks was about equal in southwest and southeast during this survey. Fewer gadwalls were counted in southwest and more gadwalls, scaup, and canvasbacks were counted in southeast Louisiana accounting for most of the differences in population estimates in those regions from December. The largest concentrations of ducks in southwest Louisiana were noted on Lacassine NWR, the open waters of White Lake, and sewage lagoons near I-10. In southeast Louisiana, large groups of ducks were again noted in the upper Terrebonne marshes and both south and east of Venice, but another concentration was noted on Delta Farms south of Lake Salvador.

Water level at Catahoula Lake was about 1 foot above management target for the January survey. Substantial habitat for dabbling ducks remained on the periphery of the lake, but few were counted on this survey. Although the total number was higher than the 64,000 ducks counted last January, and the most recent 5-year average of 79,000, it was dominated by canvasbacks with a surprisingly low number of ring-necked ducks, which were quite abundant on the coastal transects, and very few dabbling ducks. Above-target water levels, relative poor moist-soil food production this summer and recent rainfall in nearby agricultural habitats all likely contributed to the low dabbling duck numbers. As usual during the open hunting season, virtually all ducks were counted in the sanctuary in the center of the lake.

In January, LDWF conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Maurepas, Pontchartrain, and Borgne. An estimated 23,000 scaup were estimated which is less than half of the 53,000 estimated in December, and a small fraction of the 733,000 estimated on last January's survey. The low number of scaup on the lakes is in contrast to above-average number estimated on the coastal transects in southeast Louisiana. As noted in January 2014, when a record high number of scaup on the lakes was associated with a well below-average number on the coastal transects, there may be an inverse relationship between the estimates from these 2 surveys, at least in years of marked changes. Unlike in some years, few scaup were noted offshore while traveling between transect lines.

Another 16,600 ducks were counted in northwest Louisiana, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and Upper Toledo Bend reservoir. This is much higher than the 8,900 counted in December, 23% higher than last January's count of 13,500 and 18% higher than the January average since 2005 of 14,000 ducks. The most abundant species were gadwall (6,400), green-winged teal (3,000), and ring-necked ducks (2,500), and the largest numbers were seen on Bayou Pierre WMA, managed impoundments near Loggy Bayou and north of Lock 5 on the Red River.

In NE Louisiana, the traditional cruise survey of selected habitats was delayed for over a week because of poor weather and took much longer than the November or December surveys because of increased shallow-flooded habitat in agricultural areas due to early-January rainfall. A total of 186,000 ducks and 161,000 (11% white-fronted) geese were counted in the surveyed habitats. That is substantially higher than the 104,000 ducks and 78,000 geese counted in December and higher than the 160,000 ducks and 112,000 geese counted last January in mostly ice-covered habitats. The 186,000 ducks is 8% higher than the 10-year average of 172,000; and the 160,000 geese is 10% higher than the 10-year average of 146,000. The most abundant species were green-winged teal (43,000), shoveler (36,000), gadwall (31,000), mallard (24,000) and ring-necked duck (20,000). The largest concentrations of ducks were seen in the agricultural fields between Bunkie and Grand Cote NWR, at Mollicy Farms of Upper

Ouachita NWR, and the agricultural fields south of Vidalia. Goose counts were also very high near Grand Cote NWR and south of Vidalia, but large groups were also noted in the Bonita/Mer Rouge habitats.

Rainfall since the December survey has improved habitat availability in the agricultural regions across the state, and overall, habitat conditions are improved. Water levels in coastal marsh habitats were highly variable during this survey. Tidal marshes had very low water levels due to north winds from recent cold fronts and low tides. In contrast, higher water-levels were noted in most impounded marsh habitats, some to the point of providing lower-quality foraging habitat for dabbling ducks than in November or December. Still, good amounts of submerged aquatic vegetation were apparent in many areas across the coastal zone. By the time of the survey, ice was gone from NE and central Louisiana fields and good water levels in most backwater habitats existed. Habitat conditions were much improved from November and December, but were about average. Habitat conditions at Catahoula Lake have been below average all year for dabbling ducks. Water-level was above the management target but falling at the time of this survey, but with expanded habitat in nearby agricultural fields, little use by dabbling ducks and continued excellent canvasback habitat is expected before flooding the lake in early-February.